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United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

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SEP 30 1998

INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

S/S

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
CLASSIFIED BY DEPT. OF STATE, M. GRAFELD, DAS, A/GIS, ACTING  
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CLASSIFICATION: CONFIDENTIAL REASON: 1.4(D)  
DECLASSIFY AFTER: 29 SEP 2023  
DATE/CASE ID: 14 JUN 2010 200503654

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DECL: 9/30/03

TO: The Deputy Secretary

FROM: ARA - Peter F. Romero, Acting *info*

SUBJECT: Venezuelan Presidential Candidate Hugo Chavez: More Than Words Will Ever Say

Strobe, you had asked for some thoughts on Venezuela.

SUMMARY

As a lead up to the December presidential elections in Venezuela, Ambassador Maisto met with leading candidate Hugo Chavez for a three-hour breakfast on Friday, September 25. The Ambassador underscored that shared commitment to democracy and constitutional government is a hallmark of U.S.-Venezuelan relations. Chavez [redacted] insists he is a democrat, favors privatization, wants strong counternarcotics programs [redacted] that Venezuelan democracy will fail without him, [redacted] Nonetheless, he seems to be slowing moving towards the conclusion that he will not have too many options if he wants to govern effectively. A good first encounter, we have thus begun our engagement of Chavez in conjunction with meetings of all the major presidential candidates. B1

DISCUSSION

Ambassador Maisto hosted Hugo Chavez for breakfast on September 25. Chavez, the leader of a failed 1992 coup attempt, is a cashiered army Lt. Colonel. According to most polls, he has an 18-20 point lead over his nearest rival. Earlier in the week, Embassy political and economic counselors met with key Chavez advisor Luis Miquilena, a 76-year old trade unionist and former communist.

In his meeting, the Ambassador laid out our interests and concerns regarding the upcoming election. He underscored that the basis of the U.S.-Venezuela relationship is a shared

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Classified by: ARA Acting Assistant Secretary Peter F. Romero  
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commitment to democracy and constitutional government. The Ambassador told Chavez that the USG supports fair and democratic elections as well as the right of whoever wins to assume office. He questioned Chavez about campaign rhetoric declaring he will call a constituent assembly, which the present constitution does not allow. He also cautioned Chavez that an unclear economic message would scare investors and cause continued capital flight, exacerbating an already unstable Venezuelan economy.

Responding, Chavez stressed his commitment to democracy and pledged to govern within democratic norms. He added, however, that entrenched political interests would almost certainly seek to block his key political reforms. That, he added, may require him to call for a national referendum to elect, democratically, a constituent assembly that would have sharply defined responsibilities. [redacted] Chavez said "I am the hope of the people, and without me democracy will not last." [redacted]

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Chavez went on to emphasize his desire to maintain a good relationship with the U.S., including counternarcotics cooperation and strong energy ties. He recognized Venezuela's need for private capital and investment, and the degree to which such investment would decide the fate of his government. He further stressed that he does not want to politicize the armed forces, and intends to put together a cabinet with solid credentials in order to send the right message to the international community. Chavez did not raise our refusal to issue him a visa, nor has he made it an issue in his campaign.

The Ambassador's meeting with Chavez was a good first encounter. The devil will come in the details if Chavez is elected and then sees "all the moving parts" of his government and its international obligations. His concept for a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution does not comport with current Venezuelan constitutional order and could lead to immediate confrontation with Congress and Venezuela's principal political parties. There are little more than two months left until the elections and we will continue the dialogue we have started with Chavez and his advisors [redacted] Chavez, or any of the other candidates, will not have too many options, if indeed, they are to govern effectively. Chavez seems to be slowly moving towards this conclusion.

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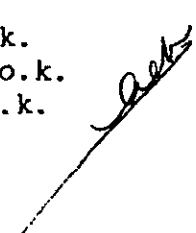
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